

ATTITUDES TOWARD SUGAR

A Study Conducted for:
THE SUGAR ASSOCIATION

AND

THE INTERNATIONAL SUGAR RESEARCH FOUNDATION

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SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

Opinion Leaders

1. Physicians' attitudes toward sugar

- Physicians believe that sugar, in moderation, is a necessary part of the diet of normal, healthy individuals. They feel it plays a vital role in meeting the energy needs of the growing child.
- Despite these generally favorable attitudes toward sugar in moderation, physicians do express concern about the consumption level of sugar in the United States. They feel that children's and adolescents' intake of sugar and sugar-sweetened products should be restricted. These foods, they feel, are harmful to children's teeth.
- Physicians recommend restricted sugar intake in cases of obesity, maturity-onset diabetes, predisposition to diabetes, coronary heart disease, and elevated triglycerides. Some also recommend restricted sugar intake for hypoglycemia patients.
- Restriction of sugar intake for the diabetes-prone patient stems from a belief that sustained and excessive use of sugar accelerates the onset of the disease where the tendency toward the disease exists. The same, they feel, is not true where there is no family history or predisposition to diabetes.
- Physicians see a causative relationship between sugar and coronary disease but deny that such a relationship exists between sugar and skin conditions such as acne.

2. Dentists' attitudes toward sugar

- Dentists, as a group, display more negative attitudes toward sugar than any of the other opinion leader



groups studied. Nine out of ten dentists believe that sugar consumption in the United States is too high.

- The basis for these attitudes toward sugar lies in the fact that dentists regard sugar consumption as the second most important cause of tooth decay.
- The mechanism whereby sugar is perceived to contribute to tooth decay is by contributing to the formation of dental plaque. This, in turn, traps bacteria and permits attack on the teeth.
- Three-quarters of all dentists believe that reduced sugar consumption would prevent most children's cavities. About a third believe that similar benefits could accrue to adults if their consumption of sugar was reduced. Fewer than one dentist in ten believes that there would be no benefits to adult dental health from reduced intake of sugar.

3. Attitudes of writers, editors, legislators and other highly visible opinion leaders

- In some respects the attitudes of "visibles" toward sugar is more favorable than that of dentists; in others there is little difference between the two groups.
- "Visibles" are least likely of all the groups studied to acknowledge the need for sugar in a balanced diet. They are as likely as dentists to subscribe to the validity of the "empty calorie" charge leveled against sugar.
- On the other hand, they are less likely than dentists to see a need for restricting intake of sugar and sugar-sweetened products. Both "visibles" and dentists feel equally strongly that such products are a major cause of tooth decay among children. "Visibles" are inclined to predict less dramatic reduction of cavities among children as a result of reduced sugar consumption than do dentists.

4. Attitudes of medical and dental researchers; dieticians and nutritionists; industry research and development personnel

- This group of "influentials" believes, like physicians, that sugar is necessary for maintenance of a balanced diet, and that it is difficult to meet a growing child's energy needs without sugar in the diet.
- They do not see a need for normal adults to restrict sugar intake, but do feel that such restrictions should be placed on both children and adolescents.
- Almost equal proportions of these influentials call the "empty calorie" charge leveled against sugar valid as call it invalid.
- Industry personnel foresee no change in overall future consumption of sugar and sugar-sweetened products. They do, however, predict a decrease in use of pre-sweetened cereals and sugar-sweetened soft drinks, and an increase in the use of sugar substitutes and artificially sweetened foods.

Consumers

- Consumers display markedly ambivalent attitudes toward sugar. Their use of sugar is inconsistent with some of the negative attitudes they express.
- White or table sugar is equated in their minds with brown sugar and corn syrup for "healthfulness", but is thought less healthful than honey (most healthful) and molasses (second most). Although it is not perceived to be harmful to health, neither is it viewed as particularly healthful. Despite its actual and relative rating vis-a-vis other sweeteners, white sugar is reported used by three-quarters of all consumers -- far more than use of any other sweetener.
- Consumers regard sugar as necessary in a balanced diet, and believe it essential in meeting a growing child's energy needs, as do physicians. Unlike physicians,

however, they believe firmly that use of sugar, even by normal adults and children, should be restricted.

- Consumers, similarly, regard artificial sweeteners as potential health hazards, and believe that use of these, too, should be restricted, even by normal individuals.
- One of the two major problems consumers associate with sugar is tooth decay. Although consumers are less likely to see dramatic benefits to dental health resulting from decreased sugar consumption, over one-half believe most children's cavities could thus be prevented. Over one-quarter believe this to be true of adult cavities.
- The second major problem consumers associate with sugar is obesity. Sugar is regarded as fattening, though less so than fatty foods. Few consumers are aware of the actual caloric value of sugar. The average estimate of the number of calories in a level teaspoon of sugar is 56.1.

Informational Sources and Needs

1. Sources used by opinion leaders

Opinion leaders mention professionally-oriented sources as those used most often -- i.e., professional journals, conventions and meetings, and colleagues -- for learning about sugar and health-related issues. The sources used most often tend also to be the ones judged to be most influential.

Relatively few opinion leaders use, or value as influential, either The Sugar Association or the International Sugar Research Foundation. Indeed, commercial advertising is said to be used by at least twice as many, and the popular press by at least three times as many opinion leaders as say they use either of these former sources. Advertising and the popular press are frequently rated as being at least as credible, if not more credible, than The Sugar Association or the International Sugar Research Foundation.